

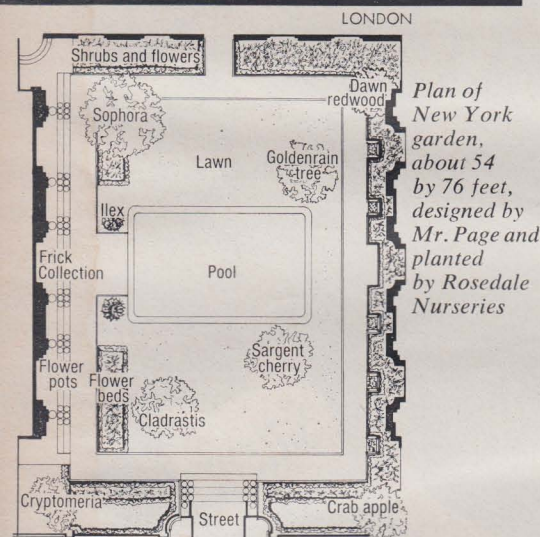
The landscape designer himself tells how he created the new garden for the Frick Collection in New York City



The shaping of a garden

By Russell Page

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The Frick Collection has grown a new garden and new wing this year, in response to growing numbers of visitors who come to see the paintings and sculpture assembled by industrialist Henry Clay Frick for the house where his family lived from 1913 to 1931. The garden, planted just this spring, was designed by Russell Page, who received the Order of the British Empire in 1951. You'll find a sampling of his gardens on page 93. Architect for the adjoining pavilion at 1 East 70th Street was Harry van Dyke, working with John Barrington Bayley and G. Frederick Poehler.*



Imagine a small plot of ground set behind high iron railings that enclose it from the street to the south. On the west side is the new Frick pavilion with a classical façade on the lines of a 17th-century orangery. Elaborate 18th-century-style stone walls 20 feet high complete the northern and eastern sides. Beyond are the rather sleazy backs of high buildings. The whole faces south, so there is light and air.

It was decided that the space had to be a garden and not a graveled courtyard. At first glance, a formal box-edged parterre, maybe surrounding a central fountain, seemed the obvious answer. Thinking it over I decided against this. As the principal façade of the pavilion was architecturally in larger scale than the more delicate stone walls, it would have been almost impossible to create any formal pattern in a scale to work with both.

I also thought that a flat, formal pattern would produce a sunbaked room furnished solely with a carpet, when what was needed was to distract attention from

the high buildings to the north. So first I set a planter 60 feet long, 5 wide, and 4½ deep, on a steel framework behind the top of the north wall. Planted thickly with trees, this suggests a neighboring garden at a higher level. The buildings beyond cease to dominate.

The power of illusion

To give spaciousness, I decided to make it mainly lawn with low plantings concentrated in narrow beds at the foot of the north and east walls. Even this central lawn would not give me the sense of distance I thought was needed, so, set axially on the great central French windows of the new wing, I made a rectangular pool as large as I dared (it takes up a third of the lawn area). This pool with a narrow flat stone rim is dead level with the grass. Water between buildings helps to cheat on distance. I have worked with water in many gardens, always with some end in mind, but it was recently, while wandering around Haarlem in Holland, I noticed how a narrow canal between buildings suspends one's judgment of actual distance. At the Frick garden, a visitor looking from the street sees a narrow strip of water, which seems to make the back wall recede. Seen from inside the building, the rectangle becomes square—so already I have two quite different spatial compositions in this very small area.

But we are still dealing with the bottom of a box, which, if unrelieved, would remain in a blaze of light with hard angular shadows from the surrounding constructions. Only trees would help. They would give broken light and shade, and the pattern of their branches in winter and their summer volume of foliage would modify the impact of the high neighboring buildings. Besides, the whole garden is 2 feet 6 inches above street level so one could look through the branches.

So formal and symmetrical a setting would suggest straight lines, like pleached (clipped) lindens—historically correct but one would “read” them at a glance. I needed to hold the spectator's attention, to tempt the eye to explore and linger.

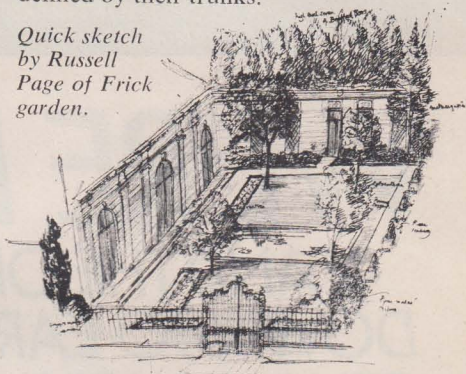
Good trees for town

Breaking the rules (since rules are good servants but not always good masters), I decided to use trees of different forms and habits, placing them asymmetrically so that their trunks would give illusory depths to a very shallow garden. Two conical *Cryptomeria japonica* (an excel-

Continued on page 36

lent town tree) break the angles of buildings close to the street. In the northeast corner, a 30-foot *Metasequoia* repeats the conical (though this time deciduous) form and masks a disagreeable corner at high level. The other trees are all flowerers that bloom after the first spring flush. Near the fence is a *Malus hupehensis*, latest crabapple to flower. After it comes *Cladrastis lutea*, a lovely yellow-wood. For still later, there is a flowered *Koelreuteria*, and latest of all the Japanese *Sophora*. Yes, it's a lot of trees for a small space, but they are set so that from the street and from inside the building the eye may wander under a canopy of leaves and flowers through the airy spaces defined by their trunks.

*Quick sketch
by Russell
Page of Frick
garden.*



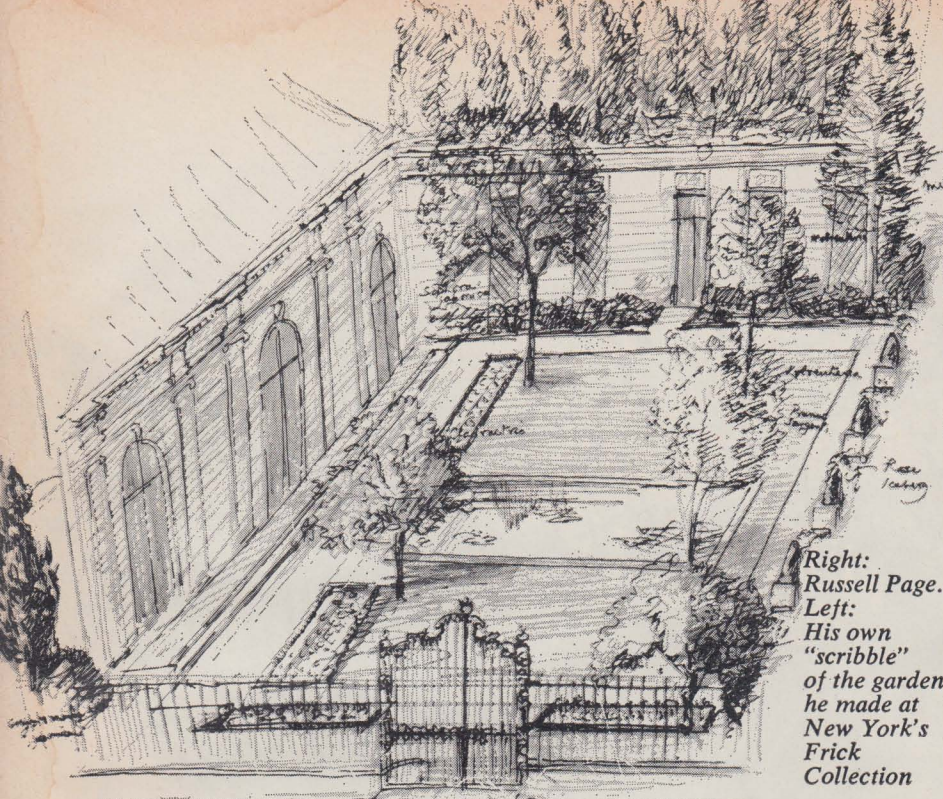
And flowers . . .

Now I am called back to another duty, for there must be flowers in one of the city's rare gardens. At the edges of the lawn there are four symmetrically placed box-edged rectangular beds to be kept bright with tulips, followed by begonias, blue salvia, and marigolds through spring, summer, and fall. Flowerpots will hold petunias, lantana, and chrysanthemums.

Under and along the whole length of the eastern wall is a band of the white rose 'Iceberg,' which is one of the three best roses of the last 40 years (the others are 'Peace' and 'Superstar'). Under the north wall we put andromedas, azaleas in whites and cream and palest yellow, late-flowering hydrangeas—*Hydrangea quercifolia* and *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Grandiflora,'—and clumps of white, lemon yellow, and palest pink lilies, as well as the bulbous *Galtonia candicans* with its spires of giant snowdrops in August.

The dark green trellised niches will gradually be covered with equally dark green curtains of espaliered cotoneaster and pyracantha, flowering in spring with Japanese quince to be grown through them. And here and there the formal architecture of greenish limestone will be set off by a filigree of white wisteria.

If, as a garden designer, I were asked what I was aiming for in this small city garden, I would answer "tranquility." Because that is what I feel inside the Frick Collection, and that is the quality shared by the greatest gardens I have known. ■



Right:
Russell Page.
Left:
His own
"scribble"
of the garden
he made at
New York's
Frick
Collection

Russell Page, whose new garden at the Frick Collection was planted this spring, reveals the secret of his art in this very personal interview by Caroline Seeborn

"Green fingers are the extensions of a verdant heart," wrote Russell Page in his wonderful book, *The Education of a Gardener* (Collins, London). Mr. Page himself, with many years of gardening behind him, is as verdant as an English lawn. His gardening takes him all over the world—4 airline trips a week is usual—and he recently arrived in New York City where he is completing his new garden for the Frick Collection, a beautiful house turned art museum by its owner, Henry Clay Frick (see more about this garden on page 34). He is very tall indeed, given to wearing sky-blue socks, and, with his pointed ears and large eyes, he looks rather like an overgrown faun—a not unfitting impression for one who has spent his life among the green and growing things of nature.

He is a busy man, and has a brisk, matter-of-fact manner, having learned, he says, from the great French decorator, Stephane Boudin, how to be "clear, rap-

id, and competent when faced with a client." Clients Russell Page has faced include some of the notable people of our time: the late Duke of Windsor, the Agnellis, the Marquess of Bath, Marcel Boussac, J. Ortiz-Patino, Mrs. William Paley, Sir William and Lady Walton. He learned gardening in England in the twenties, "when there was still a leisure class," and one senses he has some nostalgia for those days when trained gardeners were readily available to care for the marvelous creations the landscape artist wrought. "If you find a gardener anywhere in Europe today, he's bound to be over 55," he says with evident regret. He thinks, however, that there may now be a small swing back to professional gardening, particularly among young people. He has also noticed the enormous number of gardening and grow-your-own books in the stores across America. "There's a change for the better," he feels, "a new interest in gardening."

"A garden is a song of praise"

ELLIOTT ERWITT

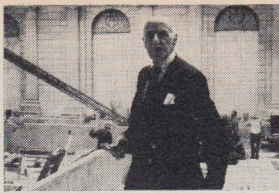
FAR RIGHT, DERRY MOORE

“A small formal pool

is set off by a band of
heavy-foliaged *Peltiphyllum*”

—Mr. Page's description of a detail in the garden
he designed for composer
Sir William and Lady Walton on the
Italian island of Ischia. You can
see more of this and other gardens
on the following pages.





A song of praise

"As a painter uses color, a gardener uses plants"

Gardening, Mr. Page recognizes, is an evanescent art—"and I consider it an art just as a painter considers painting an art." But he believes a good garden can last. "The skeleton has to be done in such a way that somebody 200 years later can see the traces. When I see the Villa Madama in Rome I recognize the magic and why it's there, although there's nothing much left of Raphael's plans except the great terrace.

"Size has very little to do with it. The greatest piece of gardening in the world is a little staircase in the Generalife, the summer villa of the Alhambra in Granada. Behind a long narrow garden in the courtyard there's a piece of rising ground, and they made a staircase there, just some stone stairs, maybe 5 or 6 feet wide, with 3 landings. On either side are low parapet walls. The tops of the walls

are hollowed out as runnels down which water races, and on each landing of the stairway there is a single vertical jet. The whole stairway is set in a grove of bay laurels which meet overhead. That's all there is. Just the sound of the water, this very simple staircase, and the dappled light coming through the green bay trees,

and it's the best thing in gardening that I know, anywhere in the world."

The technique of gardening has changed enormously in Mr. Page's lifetime. "In the old days," he recalls, "one thought of a garden as a complex of plants and patterns, with herbaceous borders, for instance. All that has become so difficult now from the point of view of maintenance. I see gardening today in a completely different light. Now I work with land modeling, with trees, with water.

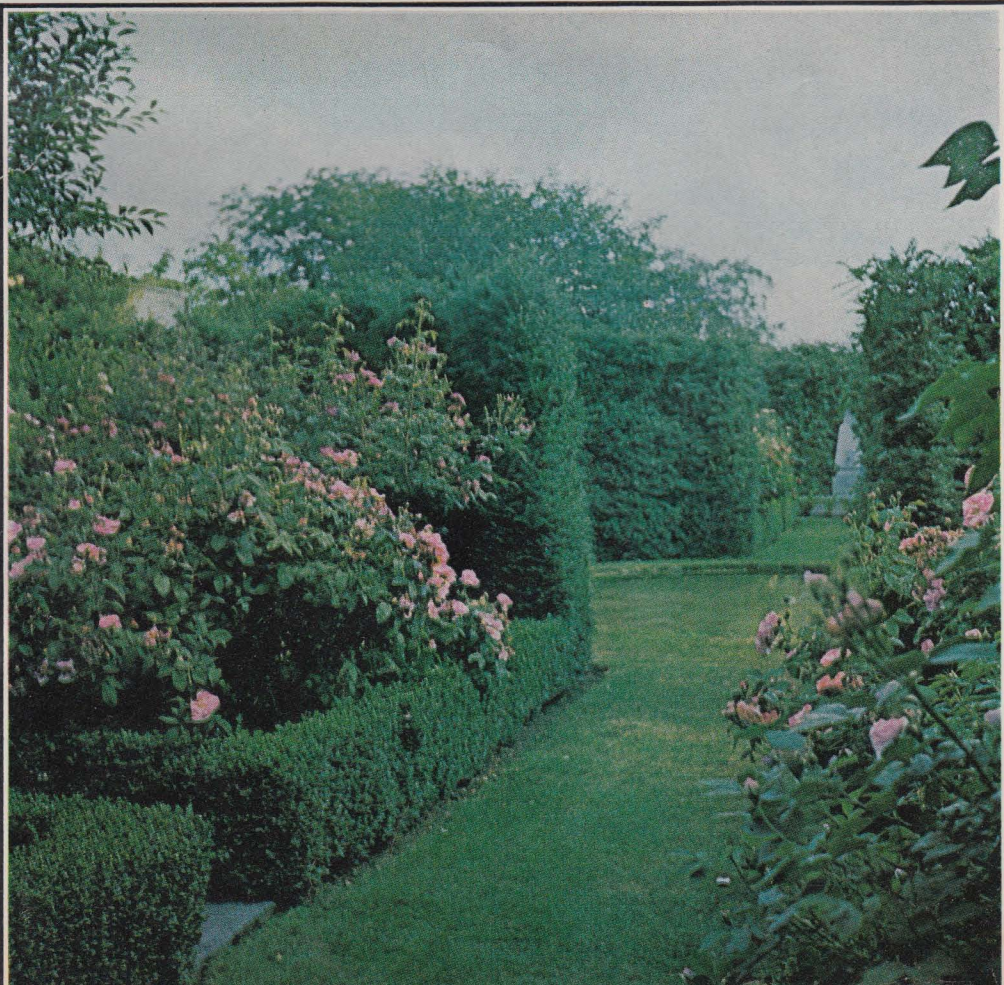
"Land modeling used to be a huge undertaking with hundreds of men digging with wheelbarrows, like building the Great Wall of China. Now it's relatively simple. You get a bulldozer and a driver—and most bulldozer drivers are brilliant. (Continued on page 118)

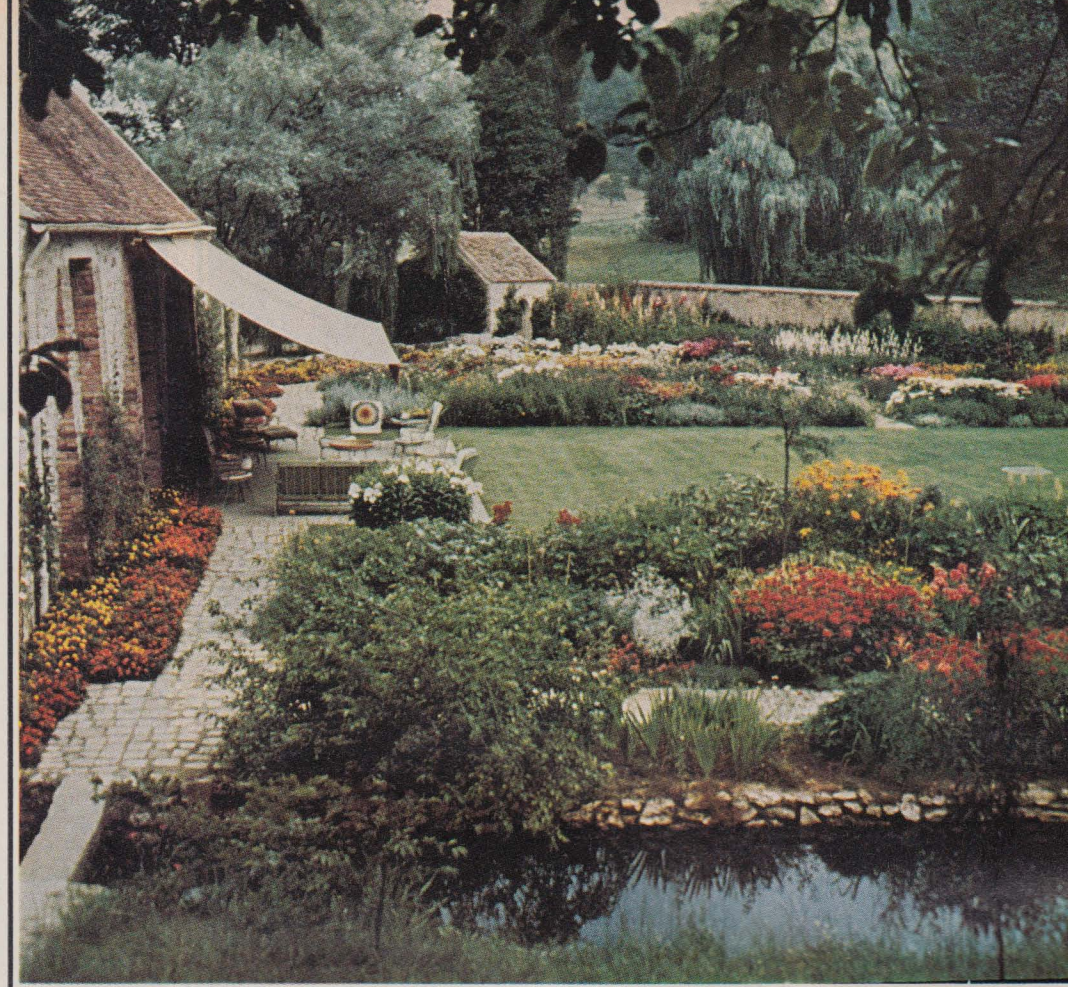


A pool around volcanic rocks for Sir William and Lady Walton on Ischia
Hedges and roses in Mr. David and Lady Caroline Somerset's garden in England

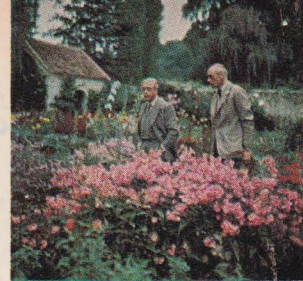


*The watery stairway at Alhambra—
"the best thing in gardening I know"*





A flowery cottage garden for the Duke of Windsor outside Paris
Water and steps for Jean Prouvost in southern France



“Volcanic rocks

were surrounded by water to make a focal point at the lowest level of Sir William and Lady Walton's garden—just a rocky waterless gully on a steep hillside when they acquired it perhaps 20 years ago. A flight of steps rises on the far side and a path leads off to a small formal pool with a jet fountain [see previous page]. Over the years the garden has become green and splendid with palms, chestnuts, cedars, bamboos, tree ferns—eccentric but visually successful neighbors supremely well-gardened.”

“An English garden

round an old French mill house was what the Duke of Windsor wanted and which we set out to make [top]. We massed all the old-fashioned herbaceous plants he loved, mixed with roses, syringas, lavender, artemisia. Adapting it to a French setting was an exercise in discretion, a quality indispensable to good garden design. The summer garden was all in opalescent colors with the blues of delphiniums and pinks of phlox. In fall the garden changed: yellows, reds, purples.”

“High yew trees

enclose a circular pool in Mr. David and Lady Caroline Somerset's small walled garden, filled with old-fashioned roses. Nearby are the croquet lawn and formal box-edged kitchen garden with espaliered apple trees, bands of flowers, squares of vegetables.”

“Water accents

mark all the different compartments of Jean Prouvost's Provençal garden. One is always accompanied by its music. Here is one of many changes in level where steps lead up from the house terrace to a flowered lawn. Planting is of cypresses, oleanders, myrtle, rosemary, water lilies. Flowerpots are set on steps.”



A song of praise

“Don’t start with ideas about gardens, start with the place”

A bouquet of advice from Russell Page. The following ideas have been culled from Mr. Page’s book *The Education of a Gardener*.

1 “When you have settled on what kind of flowers you want to plant, decide where you want to put them, how much space they should take, and then plant them, whatever they are, there and only there . . . let them tell their story fully and just once.”

2 “If I were to choose a site for myself, I would prefer a hollow to a hilltop. A panorama and a garden seen together distract from each other. A view, too, usually means wind, and a windy garden is unrewarding.”

3 “For a theme of some kind, a basic idea is essential. The factor, which will suggest the theme, may well be some predominating element already on the site: a level grass lawn, a group of silver birches, an apple orchard or an olive grove, a stretch of sandy gravel and heather. All the plan and planting should reiterate and reinforce the basic motif.”

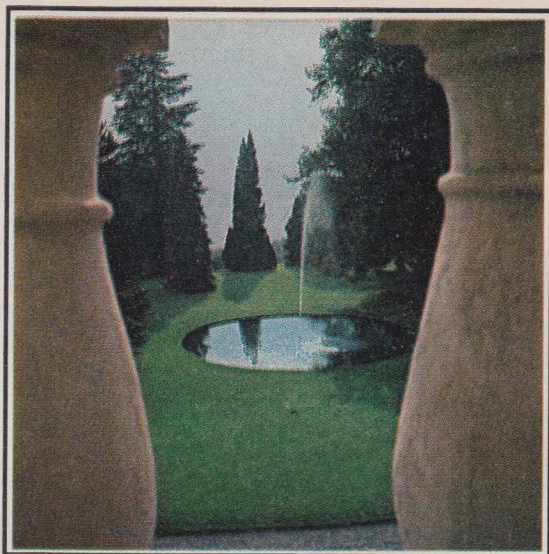
4 “I used to be taught in art school, ‘Know what it is you want to say, then try to express it as simply as you can.’ So with a garden: If you have a basic idea go all out for it, and don’t allow yourself anything which will detract from that one theme. This demands courage and discipline.”

5 “On a very small site, one where the whole garden area is perhaps not larger than that of the house, I would always tend to treat the whole space as one more large room which has the sky for its ceiling. Its walls would be green hedges or a tapestry of close-foliage climbing plants, or flowery vines. It would have a panel of lawn or a mat of flowers as carpeting, as well as chairs and tables.”

6 “In general, in any garden one should limit one’s choice of plants to those that will flourish. To succeed with a rare or difficult plant is a difficult pleasure and another question. A garden which is a well-run clinic or museum lies outside the domain of visual harmony.”

7 “I try first to look at my planting as an exercise in monochrome—to see form only and, for the moment, let the color ride. I endeavor to decide where I need dark, where light, where flower and foliage should glitter or be matte and quiet in tone.”

8 “In general, I like gardens where the presence of water is at least hinted at, even if only by the old-fashioned butt collecting the rain water from the cottage roof, a simple wall-fountain or a stone bowl for the birds to drink from.”



“Mid-19th-century

trees at the entrance of the Gianni Agnellis’ villa in Villar Perosa are now mature, framing the mountains across the valley. I added no flowers, only an oval pool with a vertical jet.”

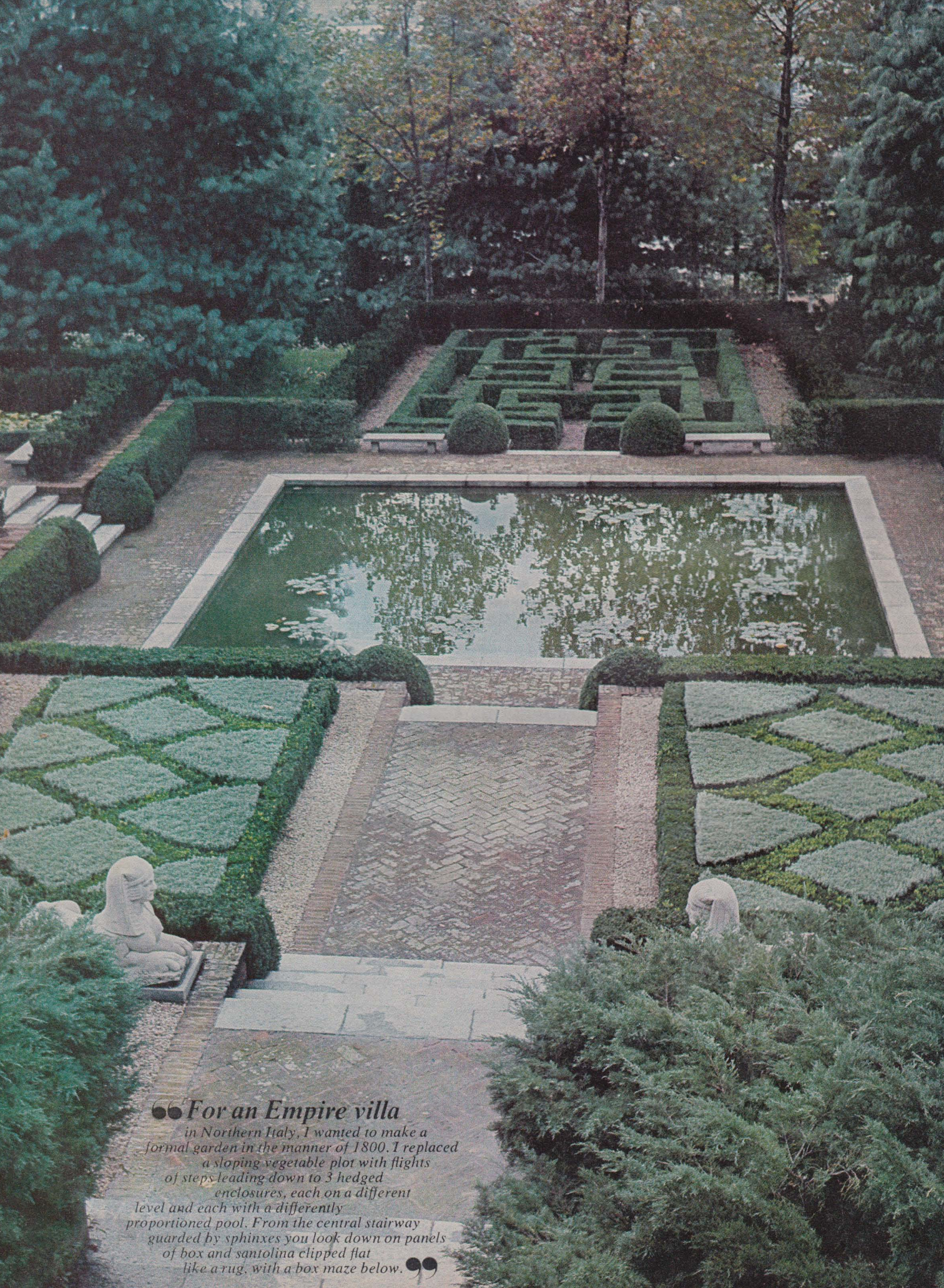
HORST



“A modern house

in Normandy, Baronne Van Zuylen’s Haras de Varaville, was erratically humped on a mound at the end of a walled garden.

This presented problems which I tried to solve by planting the mound with lavenders, potentillas, helianthemums, plumbago, sages, artemisias, and all the gray-leaved hummocky plants I could find. Slate steps lead down to a length of lawn and through a yew hedge to formal plots in a former kitchen garden. The beds are filled with annual and perennial flowers and in one section a thousand-odd roses: botanical species, old-fashioneds, and hybrid teas.”



“For an Empire villa

in Northern Italy, I wanted to make a formal garden in the manner of 1800. I replaced a sloping vegetable plot with flights of steps leading down to 3 hedged enclosures, each on a different level and each with a differently proportioned pool. From the central stairway guarded by sphinxes you look down on panels of box and santolina clipped flat like a rug, with a box maze below.”

up, who had completed their duties running a house, who seemed to have nothing else to do, but who were eager for cultural knowledge. Although cultural things may look as though they are of no importance, in fact they answer a terribly deep need in all of us for a reality that does not depend upon material evaluation."

Dr. Jaffe believes that this spiritual element is really the most profound quality of beauty. "Beautiful things expand your world, allow you to fantasize, to transcend your environment. They create a feeling for you that you do not have in everyday life. You are transported in some way, liberated, freed from the routine of existence."

Professor Harris agrees. "We all need activities that will give us a sense of relationship to qualities other than those we meet with in our ordinary daily life. The

physical aspects of earning a living and so forth are only one part of life. There are also all sorts of imponderables that seem to become more and more important as you grow. You don't ever abandon the physical realm, unless you are a true ascetic, but its relative importance changes a great deal. That is why the sense of beauty, in my opinion, is of fundamental importance to every human being. George Balanchine, the great choreographer, said recently: 'Flowers are no more useful than ballet—but they are both a necessary part of life.' It all comes down to the same thing: We need something that gives us a range of feelings, ideas, and revelations that are not obtainable elsewhere."

George Bernard Shaw once said, "A good orchestra is every whit as important to a town as a good hospital." For our own sake, it is surely time to recognize and encourage this need. The deeper our experience is of beauty, the greater are the pleasures we shall find in life.

An exercise in perception

One of the founders of American psychology used to test his students by holding up to them a piece of chalk and asking them what it was. "Chalk," they all replied. "No," he said, "you are not describing your *perception* of this object, but its *function*. What do you really see? A slim, white, grainy-textured object—not 'chalk.'"

Dr. Jaffe explains that our perception tends to be determined by our knowledge of the function of the object. You look at a glass and see it as a container of fluid, rather than a transparent tubular shape with colors and shadows. She suggests this simple

exercise in perception:

"Look at an object and try to describe what you see in terms of its shape, form, color, and depth, instead of what it does. You will start seeing things, everyday objects like teapots and ashtrays, as though you were seeing them for the first time. This is how artists see."

Dr. Harris adds an esthetic exercise to this experience:

"Try looking at the teapot or ashtray and asking, 'Is it the best possible form for doing the job?'"

Purely utilitarian objects are often beautiful simply because they adhere to the design that makes them work properly. This is really a starting point for an appreciation of beauty." ■

A song of praise *continued from page 94*

They can model ground like I shave my face. I was working on a place in Belgium for a man who had a fantastic collection of trees, and I said I would like to make a pond. So one Sunday afternoon I walked around with a collection of sticks and pegged out the shape for this pond—in about 4 acres. I came back a month later and the pond had been made and 6 months later it was full of water. Now all the ducks and geese fly in—it's made a whole new thing.

"If you plant a tree carefully and well, and look after it for the first year, after that there's no maintenance. So I'm very happy in my advanced station not to have to think about herbaceous borders, or decide whether I like pink tulips rather than white tulips. Now I see trees and water and grass—these are the main materials I am using."

Mr. Page's art is closely related to painting and sculpture, both of which he knows well. "As a painter uses color, I use plants." He studied painting under

Oskar Kokoschka, and still occasionally picks up a brush. "Painting is a wonderfully disintoxicating process. But it takes time. And the process interests me more than the results. The practice of incessant drawing helps one to express oneself rapidly and comprehensibly on paper. It is invaluable when one is trying to explain an idea to a client, or a piece of construction to a workman." Sculpture, too, is part of his business. "I'm sculpting in things that grow, so they change their shape and volume, just as I'm painting in colors that change with the changing light of the day or the seasons. A gardener is using all these art media and transposing them into another art which moves—in time."

Mr. Page tells the story of a visit to Henry Moore, when the sculptor was working away with "a couple of toothpicks on something he was holding in his hand. As I was looking at this minute artifact inspired, he told me, by an elephant skull given him by Julian Huxley, he said, 'Don't you think it would make a very good opera house?'"

Painting, sculpture, and also music

make up something of the gardener's art. "I have always tried to shape each garden as a harmony," Mr. Page says, "linking people to nature, house to landscape, the plant to its soil." And the most important creative element in this concept? "*Don't start with ideas about gardens—start with the place.* It will tell you what to do. It tells you what is there. You just have to dig it out and find it. This is where I start, always."

One of the questions most often asked Russell Page is, what is *his* garden like? Well, the answer is, he does not have a garden. Now a widower, he has moved 8 times in the last 12 years, "so nothing has had time to grow. All the gardens I have worked on are really my gardens." Another surprise, perhaps, is that he prefers to live in London rather than the country. "I like people; I think I would be bored very easily in a country cottage in the Cotswolds."

Although domestic life seems to evade him, Mr. Page likes to cook when he has the chance. "Haven't you found that most people who like painting like cooking?" He also collects Islamic metalwork and Bokharan embroideries. "The embroideries are beautiful, done on narrow strips of linen, handstitched. The colors of the ones before about 1850 are fantastic, because they were all done with vegetable dyes. After that, with aniline dyes, the colors were no longer the same." But his major pastime, evidently, is plants. "I like learning about plants, and I have friends who have great collections of plants. I spend time with them and learn more about my materials. Where they come from, how they grow, what they need. There's a sort of snobism with gardeners about plant names and so forth; one has lovely conversations going around the garden, each one capping the other. It's a sort of ritual game which never ceases to amuse me. I've done it all my life."

He is rarely bored. Traveling from Caracas to St. Louis and from New York to the south of Spain, he continues to learn about plants. "When I was in Venezuela 2 years ago I met an orchid expert who asked, 'Do you want to see the smallest orchid so far discovered in the world?' And he put something that looked like a bit of cigarette ash in my hand. It was a tiny bit of lichen, 3 millimeters perhaps—a little fleck of dust. And then he put it under a microscope and there it was, a great orchid full of scarlet and yellow and glistening leaves. One gets such magic moments in one's life. Life can be very rich without looking very far."

What Russell Page thinks about now, after a lifetime's work with gardens, is the *impact* of a garden. "If I look at a Vermeer or a Brueghel, Constable, or Cézanne, I feel a certain impact. And I want my garden to have an impact on the people who see them. *But they must not have 'personality.'* What I mean is this: Let's take something I'm interested in at the

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A song of praise
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moment, the 'Polish Rider' at the Frick. What you receive from that picture is not the personality of the rider, or of Rembrandt. Something other than personality comes across. Something deeper."

Transcending personality in a work of art is perhaps too advanced a concept for most of the amateur gardeners of this world. Russell Page is bringing a long gardening career to bear on his current musings. At the end of his book, he writes, "A garden really lives only insofar as it is an expression of faith, the embodiment of hope and a song of praise." Perhaps that goal, ambitious as it is, could serve as a model for those who hope to achieve the standards Mr. Page has attained in the art of gardening. ■